SHORT STORIES

EDITED BY C. ARTHUR PEARSON (OF PEARSON'S WEEKLY)

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SHORT STORIES.

EDITED BY C. ARTHUR PEARSON.

No. 321.] *FOR THE WEEK ENDING FEBRUARY 23, 1895.* [PRICE ONE PENNY.

A Beautiful Anarchist

THE damp, mouldy atmosphere of the place was due to its being partly under the river. It was a long, narrow apartment, with a low ceiling, whose rafters were black with age and glistening with moisture. Some half a dozen cheap lamps, set in niches in the wall, shed forth a dim, rather ghastly light, by which the twelve or fourteen men that were seated about a long table of rough pine boards were enabled to gaze into one another's faces as they conducted their deliberations.

The men were of various ages, and their faces depicted different degrees of determination and ferocity. And yet, for men in the habit of meeting here and calmly condemning this or that personage or official to death, none of them looked so very terrible. This was due, possibly, to the one common motive by which all were actuated—that, as one might say, of a patriotism run mad, and in which cruelty had no part. To decide upon the death of a fellow-creature by the knife, the pistol, or the bomb was considered by them a solemn, if disagreeable, duty; and if none flinched in its performance it was because of the fidelity of every member of the group to his conscience and his oath.

A venerable-looking old man, in coarse fustian garments, and with a long white beard flowing over his broad chest, sat at one end of the long table, and appeared to act in the capacity of a sort of chairman or president. "Fédor," he said, slowly, addressing a slender young man with a face of extraordinary, though somewhat effeminate, beauty, "we have not yet had your report upon the movements of the Prince."

"It is brief," said the young man, simply. "Prince Miristoff is totally unaware of the danger that menaces him. I have secured employment in his house as an assistant to his butler, and he makes no movement that escapes me. I have skeleton keys that give me access to all his private papers. I could have struck him down a dozen times within the week, but preferred to await your orders. Next Friday the Prince goes to the ball at the Italian Embassy. It might be arranged that night."

There were murmurs of approval from the others. Presently a man of superb proportions, with jet black hair and eyes, and great eloquence of dress and manner, spoke. "I do not quite like the idea of these sudden removals," he said, simply, "unless there is very strong reason for them. Besides, Prince Miristoff happens to be a very warm personal friend of mine. May I ask if there is no hope for him?"

The patriarchal chairman bestowed a cold glance on the speaker. "Prince Escolaivitch," he said, sarcastically, "friendship is hardly a word to use when speaking of a

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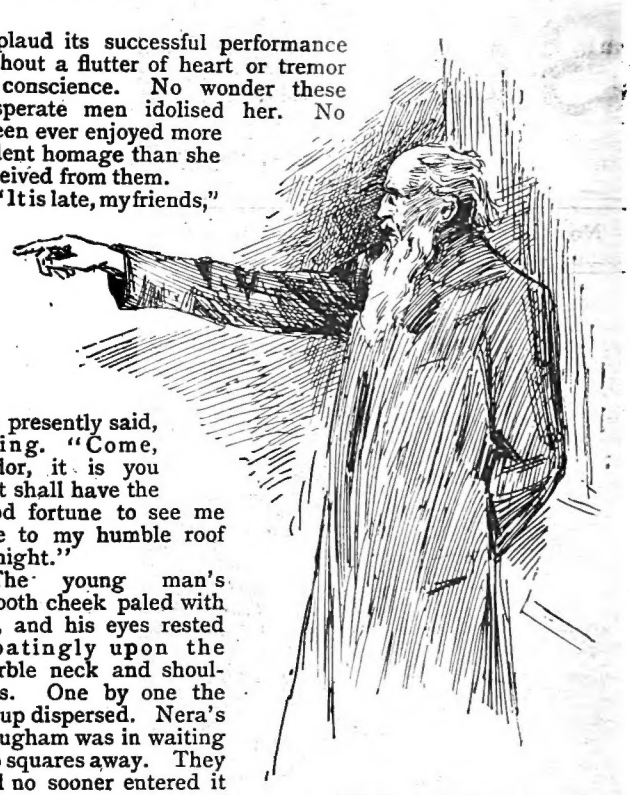
common enemy. Permit me to say that you should learn to disguise your feelings. Prince Miristoff has already been sentenced. The date of his removal has been left over for the present, that is all."

The broad, white brow of Prince Nicolas Escolaivitch, who presented the astonishing example of a nobleman of almost Royal descent figuring as the sworn foe of his own class, clouded for a moment, and then brightened as the sound of a peculiar knock was heard at the door. "It is she—Nera!" he exclaimed, and as he rushed to open it every man present rose to his feet, and stood in an attitude of deferential expectancy as Nera Norisdorff, the most beautiful woman in Russia, walked into the room, and smilingly greeted her fellow-anarchists.

She had come straight from some gorgeous *fête*, and her superb costume of pale blue silk heightened the glories of her magnificent figure. She was very tall, with broad shoulders. Her hair was a bright bronze, that matched the clear topaz of her great, tigress eyes; the mouth was somewhat large, but ripe and dewy as a cleft rose. In every line of the pure white face and of the delicately-veined hands and wrists there was evidence of race. In the firm, open glance of the eyes there was latent passion, but no cruelty, only inflexible resolution and loyalty to the cause to which she was devoting her life.

It was easy to see that these men worshipped her. She was given the seat of honour, and for an hour presided over their deliberations, listening to reports and making new assignments to duty. When she talked, the beautiful but womanish face of the young man that had been addressed as Fédor was a study. He devoured her with his eyes, and the lines about his rather sensual mouth curled themselves into a satisfied and proprietary smile. Prince Nicolas Escolaivitch also gazed at her as though he would have liked to devour her piecemeal. Occasionally, too, he exchanged glances with Fédor, and these glances were not pleasant to see.

This woman, by whom these men swore as by a deity, was one of the strange products of modern civilisation, or of the lack of it. She had no religion save that of the cause to which she was consecrating her fortune and her life. Assassination was to her a just and holy means of working towards a desired political end. She would connive at a murder and applaud its successful performance without a flutter of heart or tremor of conscience. No wonder these desperate men idolised her. No queen ever enjoyed more ardent homage than she received from them.



"Traitor! Traitor!"

"It is late, my friends," she presently said, rising. "Come, Fédor, it is you that shall have the good fortune to see me safe to my humble roof to-night."

The young man's smooth cheek paled with joy, and his eyes rested gloatingly upon the marble neck and shoulders. One by one the group dispersed. Nera's brougham was in waiting two squares away. They had no sooner entered it than she gave a sort of queer little bark of delight, and, seizing the young man in an embrace that almost hurt him, so heartily and healthily athletic was it, poured passionate kisses upon his face, murmuring swift, broken expressions of tenderness the while.

"I adore you! I adore you!"

"I adore you! I adore you!" she whispered. "Why it is I know not, but I love you better than life or death, Fédor. Dearest, since I gave myself to you life hasn't been the same. Even the grand cause itself seems a little and puny thing beside my love for you. Ah!" and she commenced her kisses afresh, going even so far as to take large, swift bites at the youth's effeminate cheeks and throat.

As for him, he smiled to himself in the darkness, a satisfied smile of one that is quite confident he is beloved, and is rather proud of it.

The ball at the Italian Embassy was no less brilliant than such affairs usually are. Nera Norisdorff was a dream of loveliness that enchanted nobles and commoners alike, irrespective of age, race, or anything else. She was resting in a corner of the conservatory after a dance when Prince Nicolas Escolaivitch, looking superbly handsome in his uniform, approached her. He was very pale. She motioned him to a seat beside her, and murmured, "I am tired; tell me something that is interesting."

"I know nothing," he answered, sullenly, "except that I would die for you."

"So would they all, if one were to believe them," she answered merrily. "Come, be original; say that you do not love me."

"You mock me," he whispered, hoarsely. "Listen, Nera. I love you so that I am sick with the thought of the peril you run. For myself I care nothing; but the thought of your constant danger is madness."

She smiled a little contemptuously, and replied, "Do I seem like a coward?"

"It is not that," he went on; "but I cannot live without you. Come away with me for a while to France—to England. You are pale and ill. It will do you good. Come with me as my sister, if you wish it. Nera, dearest, will you not come?"

His pleadings, and the sight of his dark masculine beauty, touched her, although she had not the faintest idea of listen-

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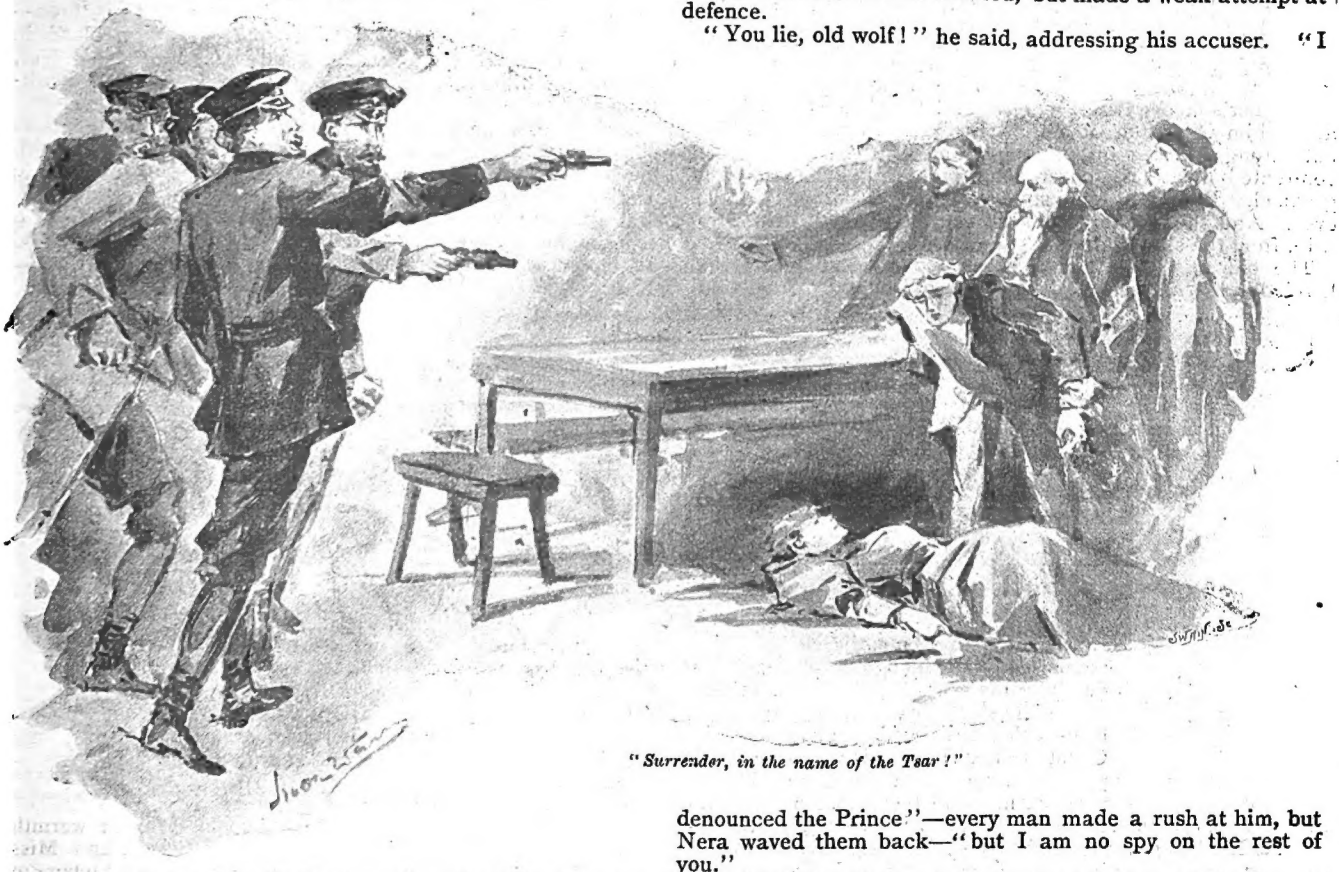
ing to his suggestions seriously. She leaned forward and placed her two hands in his. Intoxicated by his passion, the Prince bent towards her, and, before she could prevent him, had seized her in his arms and kissed her.

Fédor Ispanoff had known that Nera and the Prince were going to the ball. He decided to go himself, and he did so—in the capacity of a waiter. He was passing through the conservatory, bearing a tray of little punch goblets at the moment of the embrace and the kiss. He was not perceived, and he kept his own counsel.

. . . . . .

During the week that followed Nera abandoned herself wholly and utterly to her passion for Fédor Ispanoff. It was a curious attraction that existed between these two—the woman so big and splendid and the man so slender and effeminate. Seeing the two together, one could easily imagine Nera crushing the object of her attachment to powder if she chose. Yet that she loved him a good deal better than her own life was perfectly easy to discover.



"Surrender, in the name of the Tsar!"

So they were together morning, noon, and night, and were presumably very happy until the day upon which it became known that Prince Nicolas Escolaivitch, on the day after the ball at the Italian Embassy, had been arrested, and, on the strength of private papers discovered in his house, sent promptly to Siberia, whither he was even now on his way.

In the usual mysterious manner notices were sent out, and that evening the council met again in the queer little den-like place, where the darkness could be felt, and the moisture trickled from the rafters. There was gloom in that little circle; yes, and mighty wrath, too, for the Prince had been a popular fellow, spending his money like water, and just as earnest and sincere in his devotion to the cause of Nihilism as any penniless moujik. The talk was all of vengeance and reprisal. Even the beautiful Nera frowned and bit her lip as she sat in her place at the head of the table. Soon they fell to discussing the possible means by which the police had been led to suspect the Prince.

There was a sudden tumult at the door, and in rushed the white-haired old man that had presided at the last meeting until Nera came. His face was livid with excitement and rage, and his eyes rolled. As he entered he gave one furious glance at Ispanoff, who half rose to his feet. But the old man had fastened the door like a flash, and stood with his back against it, pointing one bony, trembling finger at him, and shrieking "Traitor! traitor!"

Every man was on his feet in an instant. Nera, ghastly white, demanded of the furious old man an explanation of his charge. Fédor Ispanoff, livid and trembling, essayed to speak. "You lie!" he managed to stammer.

"Lie? I lie, do I, pig and descendant of a thousand generation of pigs? Who sent that notification to the police that resulted in the Prince's capture? Who stands ready at this minute to deliver us all up? I believe that that is all you joined our circle for—a professional spy!"

Hoarse mutterings of direct rage arose. Ispanoff in an instant saw that he was doomed, but made a weak attempt at defence.

"You lie, old wolf!" he said, addressing his accuser. "I denounced the Prince"—every man made a rush at him, but Nera waved them back—"but I am no spy on the rest of you."

All this time Nera's face remained frozen and transfixed in the first expression of horror that had come there at the moment of the fatal accusation. In her breast a fearful war was raging. Her love seemed to be rending her asunder. On the other hand, her patriotism, her faith, her honour cried out against this man's perfidy, and demanded his instant punishment. "Can I be true to myself?" her heart was saying, "or am I nothing, after all, but a woman and a fool?"

She commanded silence with a wave of one of her slender hands. She gazed straight into the beautiful, delicate face of the traitor with a long, hopeless stare. Ispanoff returned the look feverishly. He knew that in this woman lay his only chance of life, and for an instant, as he saw the great tears well into her eyes and her lips tremble, he flattered himself with a hope. When she spoke, her voice sounded soft and far away.

"Did you denounce Prince Escolaivitch?" she asked, dully.

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"Yes!" muttered the doomed man.

"Why?" The question sounded almost childish.

He gazed at her long and steadfastly, but he had sufficient manhood to spare her the recital of the cause that led to his act. "For private reasons," he said. "I hated him. But what does it all matter? I have forfeited my life. I am ready to pay it."

An ashen pallor swept over the face of the miserable woman. How gladly she would have died in his place to have seen the shameful accusation disproved. And yet, so strong was her fidelity to her chosen cause, that, amid all her horror and grief, she actually found herself desiring the man's life with the rest, so bitterly did she loathe his crime.

The men were already fingering the knives and pistols concealed about their persons, and discussing the propriety of casting lots for an executioner. Ispanoff instinctively recognised these grim preparations, and a fearful terror swept across his soul. With a bound he was at Nera's side, whispering frantically, "I love you! Save me!"

A mighty scorn came into the great eyes. "You might have spared me that, coward!" she hissed, and then added, softly, "you must die, and I wish I could die for you!"

Ispanoff's face was ashen now, and he glanced hopelessly about him in search of a friendly face. In vain. Nothing but strong glances of contempt and murderous intention confronted him. He covered his face with his hands and groaned. Two great tears stole into Nera Norisdorff's topaz eyes. And the moisture from the river above went drip, drip, drip, from the slimy rafters.

The old man that had accused Ispanoff advanced, and handed him a dagger. "It is a rule of our order," he said, "that a man condemned to die as you, you beast, are about to die, may choose his own manner of death. You may choose your executioner, or else become your own."

Ispanoff took the knife and glanced about him. His eyes fell on the blanched, averted face of Nera. He smiled grimly, and then walked over to where she stood and handed her the weapon. "I will die by her hand," he said firmly, "or none."

There was a roar of dissent, but the bewildered old man checked it. "He has that right," he said; "the coward doubtless hopes to escape so. But you must be brave, my daughter," addressing Nera. "Remember your duty and your oath. I will hold the wretch for you. Strike!"

He grasped Ispanoff's arms and held them to his sides in a grip of iron. The young man made no struggle. He was watching the face of the woman. A glare of wrath had come over it as the traitor had placed this unjust ordeal upon her. But she did not flinch. She advanced with the weapon uplifted, and Ispanoff closed his eyes.

The instant he did so he felt kisses—one, two, three—swiftly on his lips, and then a spurt of warm blood in his very face. Nera Norisdorff, self-slain, lay at his feet, murmuring his name and caressing his feet in her death-throes.

Shrieks of rage rang through the room. "Tear him to pieces," was the cry. A rush was made for the traitor with the beautiful delicate face, and he again closed his eyes to await a death-blow.

It was not given. The door burst open with a crash, and a score of men in uniform covered the inmates with their pistols, as the hoarse voice of their captain cried: "Surrender, in the Name of the Tsar!"

A SYLVAN GODDESS

HE was born in Rome, the city of grand memories. The daughter of the Duke de Somenita, she had been an orphan from earliest infancy. Her education had been delegated by her guardians, the Count de Sestri and his wife—who were prominent figures in the gay world, and received much in their Roman palace in winter, and in summer at their villa at Quisisana—to Miss Smithson, her English governess, who chose the best professors to give her an education worthy of the future queen of Roman society.

For Donna Stefana was a very beautiful girl. Though only sixteen, she already had a dignity beyond her years; her large eyes, like those of the Isis in the Vatican, were frank and brilliant; her cameo-like profile, her scarlet lips, the shape and poise of her head, her lithe figure, suggested an antique statue. By constant association with the masterpieces of art one takes on, in some measure, their characteristics; and Donna Stefana preferred to worldly distractions long walks in the Vatican galleries, moonlit evenings in the Colosseum, and excursions to Tivoli and Frascati.

While Donna Stefana was still a young girl she was allowed to devote herself to her artistic tastes. She painted, she sang, she recited, and her professors were delighted with her talents. But when she attained her eighteenth year she was obliged to appear at the countess's drawing-rooms. "Donna Stefana," as the countess's intimates called her, had to maintain her share in fashionable chatter, to dress, to confer with milliners, to pass her nights at balls dancing with the young men, who seemed to her either importunate or wearisome. She was like a goddess strayed among mortals.

One evening at Quisisana Miss Smithson and her pupil were lingering in that delightful forest, whose beauties are too little known to strangers. The great jet of the fountain fell in silvery spray under the moon's beams and lent a refreshing coolness to the warmth of an Italian July night. The air was delicious, and Miss Smithson did not, as was her custom, urge Donna Stefana to hasten back to the villa and dress for the countess's reception.

The nightingales were singing in the midst of the green forest, when suddenly they stopped, interrupted by a stronger song, accompanied by a guitar swept by a practised hand. It was the song of Rhadames from the first act of "Aida." Then several voices intoned the chorus of the priests of Osiris, but as there were only male voices the song of the priests was, perforce, taken by the guitar. Moved by the artist's impulse, Donna Stefana, when it came to the song again, took it up with a fulness of voice made only the greater by the sonorousness of the forest; then the singers continued, and Rhadames ended the scene.

After a moment of silence, Donna Stefana and Miss Smithson saw a group of singers, dressed as tourists, emerge from the forest, evidently in search of the fair singer. At their head walked a dark young man, who wore a Tyrolean hat, such as the Milanese wear when they travel. He was dark, with an aquiline profile, a pointed beard, his moustaches turning up, and deep-set black eyes.

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Donna Stefana, not yet recovered from her emotion, stood erect near the basin, dressed as usual in white.

"It is Isis herself," exclaimed the singer. "Goddess or mortal, tell me, I conjure you," he continued, uncovering and sinking on one knee before her, "who you are?"

"I am Donna Stefana," involuntarily replied the fascinated girl.

"Duchess de Somenita," added Miss Smithson. "Pray do not forget that, sir, and let us pass."

The singer rose, gave a signal at which his suite opened to give free passage to the ladies, and bowed gracefully before them.

"I am Don Enrique de Britta, known on the stage as 'Juanito,'" he said. "It is to be regretted that the signora is a duchess. What an Aida she would make at the Teatro San Carlo!"

Donna Stefana did not reply. Miss Smithson murmured a dry "Thank you, sir," and, taking her pupil's arm, drew her to the drive, where a carriage awaited them. A moment later the mysterious Isis disappeared from the dazzled eyes of Juanito and his companions.

"What an adventure!" cried one of the young fellows, who were French artists from the Medicis Villa, in Rome, now on their summer vacation.

"She is the Duchess de Somenita, the great heiress," murmured Juanito, "and the Count de Sestri is her guardian."

"You are dreaming, Juanito," laughed Sartige, a Parisian painter and a great friend of the tenor. "Has the Goddess Isis fascinated you? Take care, she is only a young girl. She is not the Countess X. or the Princess Z. She will not send you a little note with a thousand sweet nothings in it."

"No, she will not write to me, but——"

"But——" repeated Sartige. "Come, confess your thoughts."

"I think she already loves me," Juanito said, in a low tone, "and quite as much as I love her."

"Indeed!" Sartige replied; but he said nothing more, for, knowing Juanito's romantic life, he knew that he was of the race of charmers.

"Come, Juanito," said one of the band, "let us continue our stroll. We should make the most of such a night."

"Let us serenade Count Sestri's villa," said Juanito. "There is a reception there this evening, and they will be delighted with the surprise; each signora will imagine it is in her especial honour," and the young fellows slung their guitars over their shoulders and set forth with springing tread.

They soon emerged from the forest, and finally stood before the high wall, surmounted by a terraced walk, that belonged to the Sestri Villa.

After a brief prelude on the guitars, they intoned the serenade of Flotow's "Indra," and then Juanito sang the inimitable and classic serenade of Almaviva in "Il Barbiere."

At the first notes the guests in the villa streamed out upon the terrace. Donna Stefana, with a light veil thrown over her head, seated herself on the parapet just opposite to Juanito, who devoured her with his eyes as he sang. At the end of the serenade she let fall a spray of jessamine, which Juanito caught up and pressed to his lips.

The ladies took the cue, and covered the ground with flowers, the men applauding madly.

"Come in, gentlemen," said the Count de Sestri; "you are welcome to my house."

Juanito, followed by the delighted French artists, ascended the marble steps that gave access to the gardens of the villa. The count and his guests came to meet the merry troupe, and conducted them to the other side of the villa, on that famous lawn whence one sees Vesuvius and Naples framed, as it were, by the immense trees of the garden. Juanito sang untiringly, stopping only to let his friends sing the choruses of the most famous operas.

Meanwhile, footmen spread a table on the lawn, and the company supped there under the stars, laughing and singing. The ladies were delighted to meet thus intimately artists who were such good company, so full of wit and jollity.

Juanito managed to be placed at table near Donna Stefana, who, under the influence of his glances, fell more and more under his charm. She looked only at him, and with a depth of emotion entirely foreign to her usual character. She wished that the whole universe might disappear from her sight, and that she might be left to adore her idol, like a heathen kneeling before her god.

At the end of the supper young Prince Andreo Benito, an enthusiastic lover of music, proposed the health of Juanito: "To Don Juanito, king of tenors," he said; "to his glory and his triumph!"

Juanito thanked him with a graceful gesture, "I drink to our Amphitryon," he said: "and to the goddess of the forests of Quisisana, who directed my steps, hither," he added, looking fixedly at Donna Stefana, "to the goddess whom I adore, and who is ever in my thoughts."

Donna Stefana paled under this bold declaration, which was comprehensible to her alone.

Dawn was breaking over the Apennines when the party broke up, tinting the snow-clad peaks with a rosy glow. Juanito and his friends descended to Castellamare di Stabia, where they took lodgings at the hotel. The next day it was arranged they were to visit Salerno and Amalfi, but Juanito made pretext of business at Naples to let his companions leave without him.

"You are staying at Quisisana," declared Sartige, who knew him of old, "to see that young girl, and I assure you you are making a mistake. She is not one of the whimsical and passionate creatures you are used to greeting. Believe me, you will do well to let her forget you."

"Forget me!" said Juanito. "Do you think her capable of it? If I thought she could I would not take the trouble to see her again."

"True," sighed Sartige, "you are unforgetable. Fate has given you the form of a hero of romance, with a voice more than seductive. You combine with Mephisto's adroitness the gentleness of a Romeo. Poor Goddess Isis. Poor Donna Stefana! I pity her."

"And why—since I love her?" replied Juanito, with such naïve simplicity that Sartige made no reply, but shrugged his shoulders and followed his companions.

That very evening, Juanito, guided by that instinct innate in the born gallant, posted himself near the fountain in the forest. He was sure that Donna Stefana would go there, involuntarily attracted by the remembrance of the night before. And, in fact, scarcely had he thrown himself on the moss at the foot of a grand old oak when he saw the young girl appear alone, followed by a great Russian hound, her favourite dog. She passed round the basin, and, stopping at the very place where she had stood on the previous evening, heaved a deep sigh. Juanito rose, and, approaching her, stepped into the path of light thrown by the moon. She saw him, and seemed petrified with surprise. He profited by this to approach, and sank down on one knee beside her.

"Do not be frightened," he said; "I have stayed here because I love you." The man seemed to grant a favour in declaring that he deigned to love her, and he was disingenuously frank.

In her innocence Donna Stefana did not comprehend this trick. She let her hand slip into his, and sunk in inexpressible ecstasy, drank in the sweet words he murmured in her ear. It was he—he, the man who had so completely fascinated her being—who was there on his knees before her. Seeing her trembling with emotion Juanito slipped his arm about her waist.

Many young men had held their arms about her in dancing, and Donna Stefana had felt no emotion. Juanito's arm seemed to be a circle of flame that burned her. Frightened, she gently pushed him from her.

At that moment Miss Smithson, who had been detained at the villa, rejoined her pupil.

"Sir," she cried, "what are you doing? Do not touch Donna Stefana!"

"Donna Stefana felt ill," Juanito replied, "and I was supporting her. Moreover, my intentions are perfectly honourable; if Donna Stefana will deign to give me her hand I will accept it on my knees."

"You should make such a request of Count Sestri," Miss Smithson replied. "Permit us to retire," and the governess led Donna Stefana away, with a gesture forbidding Juanito to follow them.

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The next day Count Sestri received a letter from Juanito. On reading it he burst out laughing, and went to the Countess's apartments to share his hilarity with her. There he found Donna Stefana and Miss Smithson.

He gave Juanito's letter to the Countess, and then turned to Donna Stefana.

"My dear child," he said, "you have made a conquest. This fool of a Juanito wants to abandon his career of conquests and triumphs in two continents to marry you. What can have got into his head? The idea of his marrying the daughter of a noble house and dragging her from city to city, living such a Bohemian existence as his! He is a rich Bohemian, to be sure, but he is a singer, a mountebank, look at it as you will. It is such preposterous folly that I shall not take the trouble to reply to his ridiculous proposal."

The Countess disdainfully tossed the letter into a basket.

"He is mad!" she commented, calmly. "But it is luncheon time. Give me your arm, and forget his impertinence. And do not tell any one of it; such an adventure cannot fail to tarnish the reputation of a young girl of our world."

Donna Stefana said nothing, but in a flash she measured the gulf that the world put between her and the tenor.

After luncheon she went down to Castellamare and took the train. She knew that Juanito was staying with Sartige, whose studio was well known in Chiatamonte. She inquired her way thither, and, leaving Miss Smithson in the carriage, mounted the stairs alone. As a milliner also lived in the house she gave as a pretext certain directions about trimming a hat that she must give personally. She entered the studio, softly opening the door, and found herself confronted by a curtain that served as a screen before the door. Frightened at her own audacity she stopped, and then she heard her name spoken.

"Donna Stefana," Sartige was saying, "is a well-born young girl, and the count would never give her to you willingly. And what would you do with her in your nomadic life!—she would only be a drag on you. I cannot picture you as a staid father, in slippers and dressing gown? And then you know that, once married, a tenor loses all prestige in the eyes of the public. You will be irritated by it, you will want to prove that you are still the hero of all your romances. Poor Donna Stefana, I pity her," and Sartige continued, as he spoke, to paint from his model, a pretty Transteverine girl disguised for the nonce as Summer. "Don't move, Bianca, you are posed perfectly," he said to the girl; "that is unless you want to go and kiss my friend Juanito, to make him forget his matrimonial projects."

"That's a suggestion not to be refused," laughed Bianca, and she bounded on Juanito's knees, pressing her lips to his—an attention to which Juanito did not fail to respond in kind.

At that moment there was a knock at the door at the further end of the room, and a servant entered and handed a letter to Juanito. As the tenor tore open the envelope, several thousand franc bank notes fluttered to the floor.

"Twenty-five thousand francs!" exclaimed Sartige, as he gathered them up. "Where does such a windfall drop from?"

"Read for yourself," replied Juanito, and he handed the letter to Sartige and impressed a kiss on Bianca's dimpled cheek.

Sartige read the letter:—

"Dear Signor Juanito:—Enclosed please find twenty-five thousand francs, which I beg you will accept for the delightful serenade you were good enough to give us the other evening. Believe me, the Countess and I am greatly obliged to you. Pray accept my excuses for the trifling amount of the inclosure, and permit me to sign myself always your grateful

"SESTRI."

"Bravo!" cried Sartige. "A pretty reply truly, and from a true *grand seigneur!* Well, what are you going to do now?"

"Oh, well, I shall skip off to Rome and Paris. I shall be able to have a good time now before I sail for America."

Donna Stefana descended the stairs with tottering steps, and fell into the arms of the astonished and terrified Miss Smithson. Arrived at Quisisana she was carried to her room, and it was two months before she rose from her bed, very pale, but more beautiful than ever. She had acquired that sphinx-like beauty that is possessed only by women who have been torn by suffering.

Two years later she married the young Duke de Welzio, Prince de Bertini. Proud and calm, covered with diamonds, her little duchess crown upon the rare lace that had veiled her beautiful head, she stepped forth on her husband's arm from the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, where the ceremony had just taken place.

In the midst of the crowd before her she saw Juanito, his eyes fixed on her as if in mute supplication. Not a muscle, not a fibre moved; she did not even turn away to avoid his look, which shone upon her as a ray of sunshine might rest on an icicle without melting it.

THE ROMANCE OF FIR TOP.

UP a long, rock-walled, Colorado mountain road crept a swaying, yellow-painted stage-coach. On the box with the driver sat a youthful person, with an oldish face, surmounted by a pocket hat. Something in his manner denoted an acquaintance with the vicissitudes of life in all its aspects. The driver looked at him curiously and cracked his whip.

"Ever in a hold-up, pardner?"

"Yes."

"Tho't so. Ever helt up by a woman?"

"No."

"Tho't not. I wuz onct. Want ter hear 'bout it?"

The passenger looked sharply up, and said:

"Pitch in, if it's a true story."

"'Tis. See that bend up thar whar th' road slips 'round behin' th' mount'n?"

"Yes."

"That ar's th' place."

"What were the circumstances?"

"They wuz a pile 'r circumstances. Dick Brand was a wunner. Kep' th' hotel 'n Fir Top. Could drink mo' whiskey than any other man in th' county. Well, Dick gambled an' drunk, drunk an' gambled his time away. Never los' much stuff by it, tho', 'tel Doc Martin came ter town, fer th' boys all liked Linda an' Bet, so whenever Dick wuz losing, they'd make the squeezes run his way a while.

"When Doc Martin struck th' diggin's he put on lots of side 'ith his stove-pipe hat an' yaller gloves. First time 'e seen Linda 'e smirked a lot, and purty soon 'twuz going' th' roun's that th' Doc wuz loving Brand's gal. Linda wanted none 'r his love, an' she tole 'im so. Bin a white man, he'd 'r let her be then. But 'e wa'nt. He got playin' poker 'ith Dick Brand. Martin wuz a dandy 'ith th' cards, an' won all 'r pore fool's dust.

"Dick wuz wild ter git 'is money back, of co'se, an ast Martin ter wait tel 'e could go out an' borry some stuff from somer th' boys. Martin then up an' smiled a Chinee smile

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an' pulled a roll 'r bills outen 'is inside coat pocket. Jest a roun' thousan' dollars. Well, Dick jumped like a wild mule when he seen th' pile. More money 'n he'd laid eyes on sense th' railroad wuz built up ter Sunset. Martin tole 'm ef he'd make out a morgedge on th' hotel fer one thousan' dollars, payable in a year's time, 'ith intrest at eight per cent., he'd stack th' col' thousan' th' dockyment.

"Brand done it like th' loon that 'e wuz. Martin knowed a lot 'r lawyer doin's, an' 'he drawed up th' paper, an' a couple of his cronies from down th' valley that wuz thar signed fer witness.

"Then th' cards wuz dealt. Martin discarded three, Dick jest tuck one. An', by gum, pardner, I'll eat th' off leader ef Dick didn't lose. Soon as Doc Martin had pore Dick floored, 'e showed what 'e was leadin' fer. Plunked th' cash down an' th' morgedge an' offered Dick both fer his gal Linda. In case Brand refused, 'e wuz ter be sol outen house an' home.

"Dick wus clean white an' true ter his gals, even 'f 'e did play fool at gamblin'. Tole Martin ter go somers down 'bout Mexico—that ain't th' place he said, but it's in th' neighbourhood. Shuck 'is fist in th' schemey doctor's face, an' tole 'm he'd rather see Linda marry a Hong Kong washerwoman than pair off 'ith him. Martin jest turned chalky 'roun' th' gills an' went out 'thout sayin' a word. Tuck mitey good keer ter pocket th' morgedge an' cash, tho', befo' 'e went. An' 'e didn't stop 'tel 'e wuz outer the Rockies, nother.

"By gum, sir, that ar feller never showed 'is face in Fir Top agen fer a year. Yes, 'twuz mor'n a year. Brand knowed 'e'd come back tho', an' th' pore feller tried ever' way under th' sun ter git up that morgedge money. 'Twa'n't no use tho', an' th' mis'ry of thinkin' on it turned 'im sick.

"Jest befo' his time run out, 'e called Linda an' Bet ter 'is bunk, an' tole 'em th' whole story 'bout that ar poker game an' th' morgedge.

"'Bout thirteen months later on—Brand had bin buried ten months, an' wuz mitey nigh forgot—I carried in th' mail-bag one day, an' ole man Jinks, th' postmaster, went ter work sortin' out th' mail. Arter while 'e hefted one letter ter th' light, an' looked at it kinder grim through 'is specs. I wuz zettin' on a sugar bar'l, eaten crackers an' cheese. Th' ole man spoke up an' sed:

"'Yere's a letter fer Dick Brand. I d'no whuther or no ter sen' it back or give it ter Linda.' (In speakin' 'r th' gals, folks allers used Linda's name, 'cause she kinder helt th' lines.)

"Jest then Linda came in. She pushed back 'er gingham bonnet, an' sed: 'Is thar ennything fer me, Mister Jinks?'

"'Well, Miss Linda, I jest got a letter yere fer yer paw, but bein' as he ain't present ter receive it, mebbe I'd better give it ter you, seein' as how you air his darter.'

"'Yes, lemme take it,' sed Linda. The ole man poked it out, an' Linda tuck it. She turned th' envelope over ever' which a way, jest as if she could read it 'thout openin' it, like th' trick feller in th' circus. Then she tore it open an' begun ter read. I watched, an' seed her growin' pale an' skeered like. Then she give a sort of quick gasp an' tore th' letter all ter pieces. At that time I didn't know th' ins an' outs of th' game, but I had a glimmerin'. Linda turned ter me an' sed, in a sorter jerky tone of voice:

"'Phil, what 'ud you do if a man wuz goin' ter sell yer outer house an' home?'

"'I'd kill th' skunk, Miss Linda,' sed I, short off.

"'Well, looky yere now, Phil,' put in ole man Jinks, speakin' slow an' lookin' wise, 'don't yer think that ar 'ud be agoin' contrary ter th' statoots?'

"'Spec' it would,' sed I, lookin' in Linda's purty eyes; 'but when th' statoots makes a sweet little gal look like she wuz pluggin' up th' weeps, I sez consarn th' statoots.'

"Linda looked at me 'ith a soft little creepin' outer th' mist in her eyes, and went out.

"Now, who d'ye s'pose I tuck over ter Fir Top second trip arter Linda got th' letter? Don't know, eh? Well, yer oughter. 'Twuz Doc Martin. Yes, sir, when I pulled up 'longside 'r th' train, down thar at Sunset, the Doc come walkin' out, big as Ike, an' got in 'thout so much as sayin' 'howdy.' Two other fellers got in likewise. One wuz a miner an' t'other wuz some sorter science crank—minrologist, I think they called 'im.

"'Twuz th' middle of th' month, and skacely enny express money goin' over.

"Well, ter come down ter fine p'ints, as we nighed that ar bend in th' road that I showed you, th' hosses got skeered at somethin' they smelt in the wind. I give 'm th' lash, an' away they went. Jest as we rounded th' turn—me holdin' 'em in then, you know—I hear'd a shrill, boyish-soundin' voice yell out, 'Halt!' an' halt I did.

"Gosh, how well I knowed them tones! Rite in front of th' leaders stood a slim young feller, 'ith a mask over 'is eyes. Ther' wa'n't no whiskers or mistash on 'is face, nuther. Stickin' outer th' firs, 'longside 'r th' road, wuz four or five gunbar'ls. Mor'n likely th' wa'n't no men behind 'em, tho'. Jest then, out steps another slim-dandy kid, 'ith 'is forty-four cocked.

"'My fr'en's,' said he ter th' folks in th' coach, ''tain't no use fer you ter show fight. Them thickets is full of my men. Step out, an' cash up, please.'

"They got out, an' he went through 'em. Lef' the'r watches, but tuck the'r cash. Tuck all the'r papers, too, an' was specially keerful in 'is 'tentions ter Doc Martin. When ther play wuz over, th' robbers 'loped back inter th' firs, an' I druv on. Th' miner 'lowed as how they must be green stock, fer they never looked at the express box.

"Purty soon arter that, we got ter th' hotel. Them fellers didn't know whuther or not ter go in bein' as they had no cash, but I 'spicioned how things 'ud turn out, an' tole 'em I'd stan fer th' gang. They went in at that, an' Sally Jinks fixed things fer 'em, bein' as th' gals wa'n't at home. 'Bout a nour arter that they come in, tho', an' th' dinner bell rung. Th' strangers' lookin' purty doleful, walked out ter dinner, an' set down. Before they got through eatin', Big Wallace—him that runs th' faro bank—came hustlin' in an' sed:

"'Is them ar gents that come in th' stage here?'

"'Yes,' they all hollered at onct.

"'Well, ther vig'lunce c'mitty's done tuck them fellers that robbed th' stage, an' strung 'em up. Yere's all th' plunder. You gent's just name th' 'mounts you had in stuff, an' if th' totul fits, you kin divide up 'mong ye. These yere dockyments, I'spose, kin be 'dentified.'

"Linda an Bet wuz a-settin' rite thar all th' time. Bet spoke up an' sed: 'Mister Wallace, wuz them robbers enny folks we knowed?'

"'No, Miss Bet; I guess they wuz new han's, jest struck th' trail. Boys' novel cranks, mebbe.'

"Twa'n't no time before them fellers had the'r stuff fixed proper, an' they wuz mighty jubilant, you kin bet, exceptin' ther Doc, who kep' touslin' his papers about, like he wuz huntin' fer somethin'.

"'What's th' matter, Doc,' sed I; 'ennything wrong?'

"'Why, yes,' sed he; 'they's a valubul paper yere that's missin'. It's morgedge fer a thousan' dollars, an' overdue, too.'

"He kep' lookin' an' lookin', but twa'n't thar. Then he kinder sighed, an' said, gentle-like: 'It don't make no difference, nohow, fer th' morgedge is recorded in New York.'

"Yer oughter jest seed them gals. Th'r faces looked as if the'r fr'en' had sent 'em an invite ter 'is fun'rull. Big Wallace wuz that sheepish he couldn't show 'is eyes, an' I felt sorter slack myself."

"Did he sell them out?"

"He woulder, but, you see, th' morgedge wuz paid. Linda wuz engaged ter th' foreman of th' Royal Flush, but she never had tole 'im 'bout th' poker game. When she foun' 'er road scheme wa'n't no go, she let down an' tole 'im th' whole story. Cried doing it, too, I surmise. Her feller had some stuff saved up, an' 'e jest paid Mister Doc, an' then kicked 'im outer camp. Linda named the day then, an' she lives 'ith her husband in a snug little shack up by th' Royal Flush Mill, an' Bet runs th' ole house. Thar she is now, stan'in' on th' po'ch an' peekin' out from under her bonnet at th' stage."

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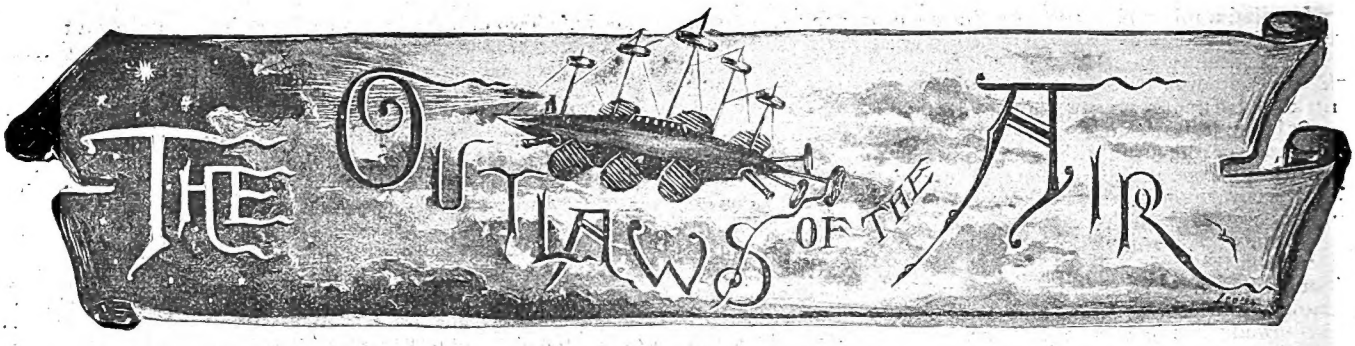

By George Griffith,

Author of "The Angel of the Revolution," "The Syren of the Skies," &c.

CHAPTER XLVII.

The End of the "Bremen."

"We won't tell any of them yet," said Sir Harry, after he had taken a long look through the glasses at the distant tinge of brown haze that blurred the western horizon. "I think we had better make sure first so as not to spoil the honour of the first discovery for you, if it turns out really to be the *Bremen*."

"Oh, I don't see any particular honour in it," said Dora, with just a perceptible shudder. "This is horrible, all this fighting and destruction. If you promise not to tell, I'll confess that I fainted right off when you sunk the yacht the other day. It seemed so awful to think of, these two ships flying up in the clouds out of reach, and blowing that unfortunate steamer to pieces, and sending her and everyone on board her to the bottom of the sea. I sometimes think the world must have gone half mad for such dreadful things to be possible—to say nothing about their being necessary, as I suppose that was."

"I quite agree with you," said Sir Harry. "The world is really much more of a mad-house than the conceit of humanity would care to admit. As a matter of fact, with all our boasted religion and civilisation, we are very little removed in some respects from mere beasts of prey. Indeed, where the predatory instincts are concerned we are rather below them than otherwise. They kill because they must kill, or else die of starvation; we kill when we have ample. No tiger ever killed an antelope or an ox just to show that he was the stronger beast of the two or to prove his exclusive right to a certain piece of jungle."

"I like to hear you say that, Sir Harry, because——"

"Now look here, Miss Dora, I have no doubt you were going to say something that it would be pleasant for me to hear," he said interrupting her; "but before you say it I wish you would explain how it is that a good Socialist like yourself can persist—well, I had almost said so obstinately—in using that most unsocialistic prefix to my name? You know what I mean."

"Yes," she said, with a faint flush on her cheek and just the suspicion of a roguish twinkle in her eyes, "I think I can quite understand what you mean, and perhaps I can answer you by reminding you that we Utopians don't call each other Miss and Mr. in our conversation."

"Oh, but then you know——. Hullo! yes, that must be the *Bremen*. A big steamer with no masts and two funnels, apparently going nowhere, just as Berthauld described her. If you'll pardon me, Dora—I mean, of course, Miss Dora—I'm afraid I shall have to postpone what bade fair to be a very interesting conversation, at any rate for me. If all goes well, we shall be back at Utopia in a few days, and then——"

"And then," said Dora, who meanwhile had opened the door of the conning-tower, "you will have had time to think out a suitably conventional apology for leaving out the 'Miss' just now. Good morning! I am going to see if Violet is awake."

"Yes, I think I can quite understand.

And with that she vanished and shut the door behind her, leaving Sir Harry with his attention for the moment perplexingly divided between thoughts of love and war.

The latter, however, imperatively demanded all his energies, for while they had been talking, the *War-Hawk* had been flying swiftly, and had brought him within plain view of the object which had attracted Dora's attention. A second look through his glasses convinced him that the object lying on the waters far below him was nothing else than the craft of which they were in search. He took its bearing carefully, and dotted its position down on a chart on which the latitude and longitude of the *War-Hawk* had already been marked at sunrise. Then he spun the steering wheel round until the dot lay dead astern of the air-ship, sent the signal for full speed to the engine-room, and the *War-Hawk* darted away westward in search of her consort.

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The *Volante*, returning by arrangement to the rendezvous, was picked up after four hours' flight, and as soon as the plan of attack had been arranged between them, the two returned to the eastward, and a little before mid-day they were soaring at a height of eight thousand feet above a calm sea, on which was floating the mastless *Bremen*, steaming to the eastward at a leisurely speed of about ten knots. To their intense disappointment there was no sign of the *Destroyer* to be seen, and so they were forced to conclude that she was away on one of her raiding expeditions for coal and stores.

Great as was the height at which they were floating, their glasses enabled them to make out the shape of an air-ship lying upon the *Bremen's* decks. Unfortunately, too, for their hopes of a surprise, the sky was absolutely cloudless and so they would be visible from the *Bremen's* decks, if only as a couple of tiny specks drifting across the background of the intense blue above them.

"Confound it, they have seen us!" said Sir Harry to Mr. Austen, who had now come to take his accustomed place in the conning-tower. "Look, the air-ship is rising. I wish we could have got a shell into them before they spotted us."

"We couldn't have done that in this clear atmosphere, and I don't think it very much matters, because, as the Yankees would say, we have decidedly got the drop on them, and I don't think there is much chance of escape. There goes Adams down to cut him off. He'll keep the air-ship busy, and we'll sink the steamer and then go and help him if it's necessary."

"Yes, that's the plan," said Sir Harry. "So I'll leave you to your manœuvring and go and take a turn at the guns. Good-bye for the present."

"Good-bye. Shoot straight!" said Mr. Austen as he turned to leave the conning-tower.

"As straight as I can, you may depend upon it," laughed Sir Harry as he closed the door and went down to the gun-room.

According to the arrangements already made, the *Volante* dropped about four thousand feet in a slanting direction towards the steamer from whose deck the Anarchist air-ship had now risen about fifteen hundred feet. She was evidently managed by an experienced hand, for she shot away to the southward at full speed and on an upward course so as to gain the advantage of being pursued. But Adams had learned a good deal from the story of the *War-Hawk's* fight with the three vessels over Northumberland and lost no time in frustrating this manœuvre.

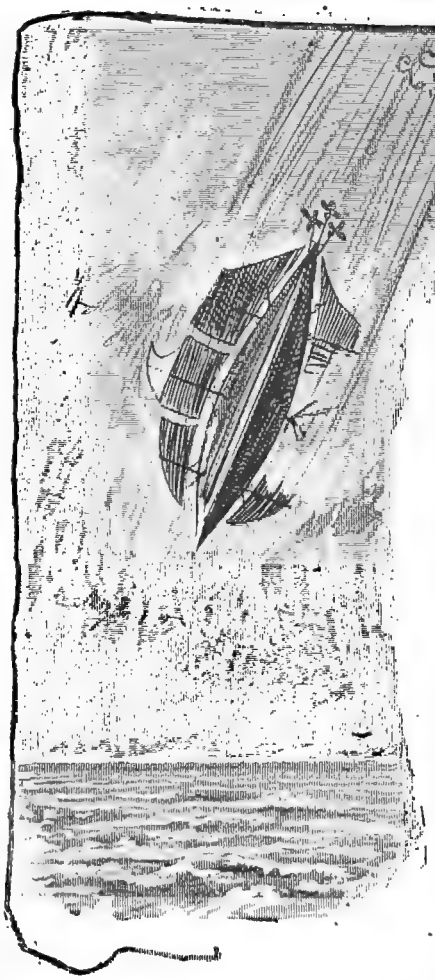
The Anarchist had about a mile start of him, but she had the worst of the elevation and the *Volante*, putting on full speed, rushed away after her, soaring two feet for her one, until the positions were reversed and Adams was able to give the order for the stern guns to open fire on him. He slowed down until the two ships were almost relatively stationary, and presently a couple of shells burst together about fifty feet above the red flag that was flying at the Anarchist's stern.

He saw her stop for an instant, and, as it were, shiver in the shaken atmosphere. Then she dropped two or three hundred feet, came to equilibrium, and swung round to fly northward again.

The moment that she wasted in turning was fatal, for one of the gunners had his gun loaded again, and just as she stopped for a second on the turn sent a lucky shell, which passed through one of her broad air-planes and exploded underneath it, blowing it into ribbons. The next instant she turned over like a winged bird, and with one awful plunge dropped like a stone into the sea four thousand feet below. They saw a little splash far away in the calm water, and that was all.

"That settled her affair," said Berthauld a few moments after, as he opened the door of the conning-tower and looked in. "I had the honour of firing that shot, Mr. Adams. I learnt my gunnery under Max Renault, on board the *Vengeur*. I hope now that if you had any doubts of my sincerity——"

"I never had any, M. Berthauld," replied Adams. "If I had had you would not be here now, but that was a splendid shot and I congratulate you, wherever you learnt to shoot. In future, if you care to take it, you shall have charge of one of the *Volante's* guns."



Dropped like a stone into the sea.

"It is an honour that I shall prize highly," said the Corsican.

"Yours are splendid guns, better both for range and accuracy than Renault's, and now I will go back and get ready to have a shot at the *Bremen*, if your consort has not already destroyed her."

As he closed the door of the conning-tower again, Adams swung the *Volante* round and headed her back to the northward, where, far away in the distance, he could see a dark speck on the water, with puffs of smoke breaking out every moment about it.

Ten minutes brought him within range, but by this time the *War-Hawk's* guns had already done terrible execution. She had sunk to within two thousand feet of the helpless and defenceless *Bremen*, and shell after shell was bursting upon the quondam liner's decks. As the *Volante* slowed up, her two bow guns came into action, and so well were they served that a perfect rain of shells was hurled upon the terrified and now despairing Anarchists.

The return of the *Volante* alone told them that their air-ship had been destroyed, and that they had now nothing to look for but swift and certain destruction. So far as they were concerned their reign of terror was over. The tables had been turned on them with a vengeance, and, maddened by panic and despair, dozens of them leapt overboard as though preferring death by drowning to being mangled and torn to pieces by the shells from the sky.

"Rats leaving a sinking ship!" said Sir Harry with a short savage laugh, as he trained his gun afresh upon the *Bremen* and sent another shell to its mark. "It is fearful work this fighting, but there is a horrible fascination about it that makes one absolutely enjoy it while you're at it."

"Especially when you are shooting at such vermin as these," said Markham, who was at the other gun, as he sent another shell on its errand of destruction. "Those fellows seem to have very little taste for their own kind of physic, but, after all, it is quite as good as the hanging they could only expect, if we were able to take them prisoners. There goes the last of the funnels. Now I think Mr. Austen might let us try a few bombs."

He had hardly spoken the words before a message came down the tube from the conning-tower telling them to cease firing and man the bomb-tubes.

"I thought so," said Markham, as he left his gun. "She is not much better than a wreck now, and a few minutes with the bombs will finish her."

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The *War-Hawk* now forged ahead a little until she came to a standstill exactly over the doomed *Brèmen*. Meanwhile, the six bomb tubes had been charged, and at the signal, "Let go," the six bombs, each filled with twenty pounds of dynamite, were released simultaneously. A blaze of light flashed out almost from stem to stern of the *Bremen;* then came the roar of the combined explosions, and they saw the great ship literally split from end to end. A vast cloud of smoke and steam rolled up, and when this had drifted away under the light breeze from the northward, the floating dockyard of the Anarchists had vanished beneath the waters of the Atlantic.

"Horrible, but necessary!" said Sir Harry drily, as he saw the bomb tubes closed, and went to his sister's cabin to tell her and Dora that it was all over.

"It is a frightful fate, even for those wretches," said Violet, half pityingly, when he had told her the news. "But I suppose it had to be done, if the world was to be saved from them. And where are we going to now?"

"Utopia is the next port of call, I believe," replied Sir Harry. "You know I told you that some of the scoundrels had taken possession of it, and so we shall have to go and clear them out. In fact, from what Berthauld tells me, we are going to do exactly what Renault intended to do to us, if it hadn't been for that lucky shot of Peter Jackson's which laid him up for a month, and so gave us time to get out with whole skins.

"That's the irony of fate, you see. 'The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small,' as the Spanish proverb says. It seems a strange thing, and yet, as a matter of sober fact, the fate of the world probably turned on that one lucky, but entirely unjustifiable, shot which Peter Jackson fired. If it hadn't been for that, I don't suppose one of us would have got out of Utopia alive, and so Renault would have been the sole possessor of the secret, and would have had the world at his mercy."

"But fancy bloodshed in our beautiful Utopia!" said Dora, with a shudder. "Who of us would ever have thought that our paradise was going to be turned into a battlefield, or a slaughter-house, for I suppose it will be more like that than anything else? I won't see it. Violet, you and I will shut ourselves up here until it's over. I could never think Utopia the same again if I saw people being killed on it."

"Well, sweetheart."

"Yes, we will do that," said Violet. "I think I love Utopia now quite as much as you do, and I couldn't bear to see it desecrated by bloodshed any more than you could."

So it came to pass four days later that the two girls sat hand in hand silent and trembling in their darkened cabin listening to the crash of exploding shells and the fearful thudding roar of the machine guns which told them that the extermination of the Anarchists who had taken possession of Utopia was being carried out with pitiless thoroughness.

They felt the air-ship rising and sinking, shooting forward and stopping, and every now and then swinging swiftly round, and this went on for six hours incessantly. Then at last they felt her gently touch the ground and come to a standstill. As she did so the door of their cabin opened and Sir Harry came in in his shirt-sleeves, and with the perspiration running down his face.

"It is all over!" he said huskily. "You can come out now, for there isn't one of the scoundrels left alive on Utopia. It's been hot work, but we've done it. Look—doesn't it seem like being at home again?"

As he spoke he pulled the window-slide back and when Dora and Violet looked out they saw that the *War-Hawk* was resting on the plateau on which they had held their memorable New Year's Day picnic, and far away below them the lovely familiar landscape stretched away down to the bay and on from the white coral beach across the emerald water of the lagoon to the long white line of breakers tossing and foaming on the reef.

"How delightful it is to be able to breathe this glorious air again!" exclaimed Violet as her brother and Markham carried her chair out into the open. "If only poor Bertie were here now instead of being cooped up in a ship under water, I think I could get well altogether in a week. Why—what is the matter?" she continued, glancing anxiously from one to another of the little group about her chair. "What are you looking at each other like that for—has anything happened to Bertie? Tell me at once, please. Don't be afraid even if he is—if he is dead, for if he is I know that he will have died at his duty like a sailor and a gentleman."

There was silence for a moment and then Dr. Roberts, passing a slip of tissue paper to Sir Harry said:

"Tell her, Milton, you can do it better than I."

"What is it? Never mind telling me. Give it to me!" exclaimed Violet almost snatching the paper out of her brother's hand. She opened it with trembling fingers and read through a gathering mist of tears:

"Bull Point Station,
"July 17th, midnight.

"News just received that *Nautilus* was surprised and torpedoed by unknown vessel off Scillies soon after nightfall. Wyndham in command. None saved. "GARDNER."

"It is God's will and the fortune of war," murmured Violet in a weak, broken voice. "Oh, my poor brave Bertie, to think of you dying like that! Take me back, I——"

Then her head fell forward on her breast, and her hands dropped limply on her lap.

"It has killed her! I thought it would," cried Sir Harry, springing forward and taking hold of her hand. "Roberts how could you——"

"Dead—nonsense—she has only fainted. I'll have her round in three minutes," said the doctor, bustling off to the ship for his restoratives. "There's no harm done, don't be afraid."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT.

"WELL, sweetheart, I think that danger is past for the present. I thought at one time they were going to break into open revolt, but I managed to convince them in the end of my good faith and devotion to the sacred cause of Anarchy. That compromise was not at all a bad idea. I am to take

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Hartog into my confidence, tell him the secret of the composition of the fuel, and whenever I go away from the camp, leave the formula for its preparation in a place known to him, so that if anything happens to me he can come back, find it and prepare the fuel as it's wanted. Very pretty, isn't it?"

"And are you going to do it?" asked Lea, looking up at Max with a smile of incredulity. They were alone together in their sitting-room in the bungalow on the afternoon of the day on which the Council of War had been held at the camp of Mount Pietra. Lea for some reason of her own, which she declined to give, had not been present, and Max had been explaining to her what had taken place.

"Do it?" he said with a short laugh at her question. "No, I see you don't take me seriously. You know me too well for that. I have been expecting this trouble ever since I brought the *Vengeur* away from Utopia. The command of the air is a magnificent thing; but, like every other priceless possession, it entails endless difficulties and dangers. You see, we are above and beyond all human laws now, and that cuts both ways. I am the master of these fellows just as long as I can keep them in hand by moral force, and remain the only possessor of the secret. Now they want the secret, and they mean to have it.

"Mein Gott, it is gone."

"If I don't find some means of outwitting them they will take it by force, or, anyhow, I don't suppose one of them would scruple to use the methods of the Holy Inquisition and torture me till they either killed me or wrung it out of me. Yet, on the other hand, if I tell them, every one of them is equal to me, all command is at an end, and therefore all concerted action. Then every one would be plotting against every body else to kill him, so as to remain the sole possessor of the command of the air.

"They might work together until we have smashed up those two or three ships that the Syndicate seems to have, but after that it would simply be a matter of mutual extermination until only one man was left in command of one ship, and he would be able to do as he pleased until one of his crew killed him or forced him to share the secret with him, and so on. That is Anarchy in command of the air, worked out to its logical conclusion. These idiots don't see how our conditions have changed since we left the earth for the air; and, as they won't submit to reasonable and necessary control, they shall pay for their folly and their want of confidence in a way that will considerably astonish them.

"What I mean to do is this, and I shall want your help in doing it. The only really dangerous man among them is Hartog, and he will have to be disposed of. He is coming with us in the *Revanche* to-morrow, because none of the other fellows will give up the command of their ship, and so he will have to wait for the new one that should be coming from the Atlantic in a few days now. Ostensibly, we are going out to meet her and hand her over to Franz. I shall write out the formula to-night, show it to Franz, and then hide it. I'll take care you know where it's hidden and you must manage to get hold of it, and destroy it before we start.

"Then, when once we get Franz on board the *Revanche*, over the Bay of Biscay, I'll denounce him as a traitor to the crew, who, I really believe, are devoted body and soul to me, and then I'll put a bullet through his ugly head and drop him into the Bay. When that's done we'll just get right out of the way and lie low for a month or two. Meanwhile, the other fellows will have used up their supply of fuel, and the air-ships will be lying waiting, useless and helpless, in the camp, and some fine morning we'll come back and wipe the lot out. Now, what do you think of that?"

"Excellent," replied Lea, with an admiring smile. "It couldn't be better, as far as it goes; but haven't you forgotten the Syndicate and its fleet? What are you going to do about them?"

"Oh, for that I shall have to trust, to a certain extent, to the chapter of accidents; but that danger is not by any means as great as it seems at first sight. When we have disappeared for a bit the odds are they'll think we've quarrelled among ourselves and wiped each other out, or something of that sort. They'll never find the fleet up here, and we can keep out of sight, and, whenever we get a chance, drop unexpectedly on one or two of their air-ships and blow them up until we've got rid of the lot in detail.

"It won't matter if it takes a year or two to do it. There'll be no hurry when these other fellows are disposed of; and then, when the *Revanche* is the only air-ship in existence, and we've killed, as we probably shall have done, Austen and Adams and the rest of them, we can begin a nice, pleasant little reign of terror on our own account."

"I see, I see!" said Lea. "That will be famous, if we can only do it; and, after all, I really don't see why we shouldn't. I suppose you won't mind Sophie Vronsky coming on board with us, will you, if only for Taxil's sake and mine? She is really the only girl in the world I can make a companion of, and I feel pretty certain that there would be difficulties with Raoul when he knew she was to be abandoned with the rest."

"Oh, yes; of course, she can come!" laughed Max in reply. "I've always thought she would make a capital sweetheart for Raoul, and I am quite glad to hear that they

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are likely to make a bargain of it. Now I must be off and see the *Revanche* got ready for her cruise to-morrow. It may be a rather long one; it would not do to have anything left out. Meanwhile, you and Sophie use your eyes and your ears, and learn everything you can that may be of use to us."

Later on that afternoon Max fulfilled his part of the bargain he had made with the captains of the fleet by writing out the formula, showing it to Hartog, and arranging with him where it was to be buried by them as soon as it was dark enough for them to do so unobserved by the others in the camp.

Of course, Max did not forget to tell Lea the spot fixed upon, and how he would mark it for her; and so adroitly did she follow his directions, that the priceless paper had not been lying underground, in the bottle in which they had inclosed it, for more than an hour before she had dug it up again with her own hands, taken it out of the bottle, and replaced it almost exactly as she had found it.

But nearly six hours later—that is to say, about a little before four o'clock in the morning—another visit was paid to the spot, this time by two men who had stolen out of the sleeping camp by different ways and met there, obviously not by accident.

Hats were waved.

"Now, my tear Taxil," said one of them in a hoarse, guttural whisper, "dis is de spot, and ve vill have it out in tree minutes. It is not buried fery deep. I did not tink it vas vorth vile, as I should vant it again so soon. You haf got your trowel, now dig avay. If ve only vorks our plans out right, dot little piece of paper vill mean de empire of de vorld to us; and you shall reign ofer it, mit de beautiful Lea, and I vill be your prime minister and chief engineer.

"Ve vill share de secret between us, and take tundering goot care dat no von else gets it so soon as ve haf got dat fool Renault out of de vay. Dat vas very lucky dat Sophie believes you so much in love mit her, and so faithful to Max, dat she told you vat a dangerous person I am, and how dey vas going to put me out of de vay. Now, if dey only knew dat it vas not Sophie at all, but the incomparable Lea, dat you haf been consuming your heart mit love for all de time in secret, I tinks de game vould haf been blayed a little differently, eh?"

"I suppose so," said Taxil, who meanwhile had been digging away with his trowel. "But, after all, it's Renault's own fault. He shouldn't have brought a girl like Lea into the Camp, or on board his ship. He must have queer ideas of Anarchy, after all, if he expected we should leave her to him, to say nothing of giving him the supreme command as well. Fancy us—Anarchists and enemies of all laws—setting up a king over us, and giving him absolute power of life and death, for that is what the possession of the secret means, after all's said and done! Ah, here we are; this is the bottle I suppose," he said, as the blade of his trowel struck with a clink on the glass.

"Jah, dot vill be it," whispered Franz, pulling a corkscrew out of his pocket as Taxil drew the bottle from the hole. "Gif it to me, and I vill open it."

Taxil handed him the bottle and he gently drew the cork, and then inverted the bottle over his hand and shook it. Of course nothing came out, for the tiny roll of paper had long ago been consumed to ashes in Lea's bedroom fire.

"Mein Gott, it is gone!" said Hartog in an agitated whisper. "By tam, dere are traitors in de camp! Now, vat is dat for a foul, dirty piece of treachery! No, dere is noding dere," he continued, shaking the bottle still more vigorously. "Now dot vill show you vat a scoundrel dat Renault is. No von else knew of de place but him, and he has come and stolen it avay. Taxil, my poy, dis is serious. Ve vill have to act sharp and prompt to-morrow or you vill never get your Lea, and I shall haf a bullet trough mine head. Are you sure you can trust de men?"

"Every one of them!" replied Taxil. "They can't stand Renault's discipline, and they hate him for it, especially since he shot Gaston that day for grumbling at the strictness of the rules. They say they might as well be sailor-slaves on board a man-of-war instead of free Anarchists, as they ought to be.

"No, there won't be any difficulty with them, especially as I've promised them plenty of plunder, and at least a village a week to sack and amuse themselves in. That's the sort of life they want. They're sick of just stopping up in the air and up here, and having all fighting and no fun. But we shall have to polish Renault off pretty quickly in the morning, now that he's got the paper back. By the way, I hope you've remembered what there was on it."

"Dere vas no fear of dat, my poy. You don't vant to show me figures twice for me to remember dem; and, besides, I wrote it out again—not completely, 'cause I had no chance, but enough to help me remember it—immediately after ve had buried it. Anyhow, it is impossible for dose oder fellows to get it, and dat is all ve vanted to take it for.

"Now, you had better bury de bottle again so dat some von else can find de choke out for demselves, for ven ve are gone dose chaps vill be hunting all ofer de valley for it. It is fery sad, but dere is not von of dem dat can keep faith mit de oder. Dat is de vorst of dese common sort of Anarchists.'

"And I don't suppose you'll keep faith with me much longer than it suits your purpose, you little pig," said Taxil to himself a few minutes later, when he had buried the bottle and parted from his fellow-conspirator. "Well, Lea is worth risking anything, even life itself for, and I'll do it; but when I once get hold of the secret I'll take care that that dirty little German doesn't have the chance to make much use of it."

While Taxil was indulging in this soliloquy Hartog, stealing furtively on his way back to bed, was communing with himself after very much the same style.

"Dat is a goot useful boy," he muttered under his breath as he slunk along. "And he vill be serviceable to me just for de present in vorking out vat de vorld vill soon call de tragic fate of Max Renault, de Anarchist. By tam, what a grim sort of joke dat vill be! I vill teach him to svindle me and lay plots for my life, to shoot me and sling me into de sea as if I vas von of dem Utopians instead of a goot Anarchist who got all de money for him and made his engines and air-ships.

"Ach Himmel, vat is dat for ingratitude! De man has no soul at all who could do dat to his friendt. But I vill show him who has de longest head in de long run. Ven he buys me for a fool he vill just lose his money. Dere is not going to be any king of de air but Franz Hartog, I can tell him. Dot vas a very nice little scheme vot he had to put me out of de vay so conveniently, but ve shall see, Monsieur Max, ve shall see!"

Despite the plots and counter-plots which were thus working underneath the surface of every-day life in the Anarchists' camp, so cunningly were all the parts played, that the company of the *Revanche* took their places as quietly, with just the same appearance of friendliness as ever; and as she rose into the air, shortly before daybreak, hats were waved and cheers followed her just as though, instead of a cargo of hate, and jealousy, and murderous designs, she carried the hearty goodwill of the whole Anarchist community.

(To be continued.)

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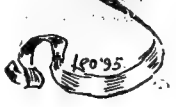
A GREAT ACHIEVEMENT.



WHEN I went into the club the other night, I found Lightly turning over the pages of the Christmas number of *The New World*. His face would have afforded a fine study for a picture of contentment, and my first thought was that he must have an article or story in the magazine. For Lightly is something of a writer, and whenever he gets anything published—which is not very often—he bores us all for weeks afterwards telling how it happened.

As soon as he caught sight of me, he beckoned me to his table, and I thought that I was in for at least a half-hour's punishment. But it turned out for once that I was interested in his talk.

"Have you seen it?" he asked, tapping the cover of the magazine, and giving a little eager laugh as he spoke, which confirmed my impression that he must be in luck.

"No," I answered; "have you anything in it?"

"Anything?" he almost shouted—"why, man, I wrote the whole number."

At this I began to wonder if his brain—never too strong—had not suddenly given way. As you well know, *The New World* is one of the most conservative periodicals—as I will admit that I have found to my own sorrow in the past—and it was preposterous that it should make up a whole number, and a Christmas number at that, from the work of one man. And it was clear to my mind that Lightly would not have been that one man in any event.

While trying to think of something quieting to say, I took the magazine and glanced over the table of contents. It was one of Lightly's fancies—which did him no good in a literary way—to have a dozen or more pen names. He used these indiscriminately, as the humour moved him, and it happened that I knew most of them. So you may imagine my surprise when I tell you that every poem, story, article, and essay in the entire magazine was signed by some one of the many names that I knew he used.

The first was a Christmas poem, signed "G. O. Lightly." Then a Christmas story, signed "T. S. Weaver" (this, he had once explained to me, stood for The Story Weaver). Then an article on "Jerusalem, Nineteen Hundred Years Ago;" "Christmas Past and Present;" and the usual run of such material as editors have fallen into the habit of serving up for the holiday issue. None of the topics were new, nor, so far as I could discover in a hasty glance, were they treated with much brilliancy. The signatures were all composed upon the same puerile plan.

Poor as much of the stuff probably was, I still could not believe that Lightly had written it all, much less secured its publication in a single number of *The New World*. I turned to him for explanation.

"Draw up a chair," he said, with what I thought an air of some condescension. "I can afford to fly high to-night, so let us have a bird and a bottle quietly in this corner while I tell you all about it."

"Of course," he said, as soon as we were fairly settled, "this is all on the quiet. I should not tell even you if you were not one of my best friends, and if I did not mean presently to ask a great favour of you. You know," he continued, "how people have been talking about the science of hypnotism for months past?"

I nodded my assent, and he went on with an uninterrupted flow of words:

"Well," he said, "I chanced some time ago to be thrown in contact with an adept in this art, or science, or whatever you are minded to call it. I recognised at once the value that a knowledge of it might be to me in making fiction, and I asked the fellow to give me some insight into it. This he did, for a consideration, and to such good purpose that I was soon able to practise the science to some extent. I presently found that it was not difficult for me to gain a hypnotic influence over any man of less robust physique than myself; but I rarely attempted to use the power.

"When I finally did it was wholly without premeditation, and it happened in this way. A few weeks ago—in fact, just as they were making up the Christmas number—I strayed into the office of *The New World*, and while there offered Aldeson this poem." Lightly put his finger on the printed page as he spoke, but went on without pause:

"Aldeson put me off with some stock remark about being full of material, of having more than he could handle, and did not even look at the poem. This nettled me considerably, and it suddenly occurred to me that Aldeson was a smaller man than myself, and that I ought to give him a good thrashing for his impudence. Then it came to me all at once that I could hypnotise him and make him accept my poem. I asked him to send his assistant away, as I wanted to speak to him privately. When we were alone, I at once began the effort to make him subject to my will. In less time than I am telling you, I had him completely under my influence, and he had accepted the poem and promised it the initial place in the number.

"Then the thought came to me to try my power a little further. Calling a messenger, I sent to my rooms for a bundle of manuscript, and sorted out from it everything that would do for a Christmas number. You know," he added parenthetically, "that I always keep a stock of material on hand, ready for all needs and seasons. I took these Christmas things up; one by one, and brought them to his attention, and he accepted each one and made a place for it in this holiday number. Then he called his assistant in and gave instructions for making up the copy—and I took him away with me and gave him a royal good time for a week. When he got back to the office it was too late to make any changes, and so you see the number has come out, with nothing but my work. And a very good number it is, too," he concluded, complacently.

"But what do you expect to gain by it?" I asked; "the story will surely come out, and it will do you no good, but quite the reverse."

"You are all wrong," replied Lightly quietly; "the story will not come out. You can see that Aldeson must be the last man to tell it. And he could have no object in doing so, especially as the number has already made such a good impression."

With that he took from his pocket copies of half-a-dozen leading papers and reviews, and showed me comments that were not only favourable, but flattering in the extreme.

"Paid for?" said I, not a little disgusted with the whole business, and particularly at being made a confidant of.

"Yes," he laughed. "And now," he added, with a slight show of hesitancy, "for the other matter."

"Go ahead," I answered, not very graciously, considering that I was dining with him; "I might as well hear it all now."

"You asked me what I expected to gain by it. You know Lettie Underwood"—I started at the name, but nodded with what composure I could command. "That dear girl," said Lightly, "has promised to marry me as soon as I have won a place in literature; in fact, as soon as I have an established standing with any of the leading magazines. This settles that point." To emphasise his meaning, he tapped *The New World* triumphantly.

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"But surely," said I, "you would not consider this fair? You would not be willing that she should know—— "

"All's fair in love, my boy. And I want you to be my best man."

I managed to get off with some half promise, and then, pleading an engagement, I got out of the club as quickly as possible and into a cab, and gave the driver the number of Lettie Underwood's house.

The dear girl—I could have choked Lightly for using the words; they were in my heart whenever I thought of her, which was all the time—was at home and received me with her usual welcome. But I held her at arm's length, and, with all the sternness that I could command, exclaimed:

"Letitia, you are a wretched trifler. Give me back my heart."

"What is the matter with the poor boy now?" she cooed softly.

"Matter enough. You have promised to marry Lightly."

"Yes," she laughed; "I remember. He proposed to me six months ago. I told him I would when he had made a success——"

"Your exact words," I said severely, were—"'when you have a standing with any of the leading magazines.'"

"Same thing," she answered airily; "he will never achieve either. It was my way of letting him down easily!"

"Letitia, listen to me," I said; "Lightly has written the entire Christmas number of *The New World*."

At this Letty looked at me reproachfully.

"Dick," she said, "where have you been dining?"

"No, it is not that," I protested; "I dined at the club, and Lightly told me himself, and he showed me the magazine and asked me to be his best man, and we only had one bottle between us."

"Well, this is a scrape!" she exclaimed ruefully; "I suppose I will have to keep my promise and marry him."

"And what about your promise to me?" I asked sarcastically.

"That was indefinite," she answered thoughtfully; "there was never any time set for that. So I shall have to marry him now; and if he should die, or anything happen, I could marry you afterwards."

"Thanks," I replied drily; "but that programme does not suit me. Now let me plan a little. You have been a wilful creature, never ready to name the day; but see the trouble you have got into. I suppose Lightly will be here early to-morrow to marry you. Now, I propose to marry you myself to-morrow at noon."

At this her eyes opened in wide protest.

"Yes," I continued, "I shall send a note to Lightly, telling him of your change, and asking him to be my best man."

"But, Dick, this is too sudden. What shall we live on?"

"Love, you practical girl," I cried, catching her in my arms; "besides, the publishers of *The New World* to-day offered me the editorship of the magazine, *vice* Aldeson, resigned. I suppose his resignation has some connection with this business of Lightly's. I am sorry for him, but I might as well have the place as another."

"And then you can print anything of your own that you want to, can't you, dear? I'm so glad you won't have to be rejected any more."

"Not even by you, sweetheart?"

"Not even by me—any more."

. . . . . .

Do you want the *finis*?

We were married on the morrow, and Lettie was as pretty a bride as ever was seen—as pretty as though she had been given months, instead of hours, for making ready. But on second thoughts, I am not sure that she had not been making ready all the time that I had been vainly asking her to name the day. I confess that I do not understand the sex.

There was but one thing to cloud our happiness. Lightly refused to be best man, or even to come to the wedding. And he has never offered any further contributions to *The New World*.

Perhaps this is because I am not like Aldeson, "of a less robust physique" than himself.

I HAD visited him on several occasions in my capacity of prison chaplain, and had endeavoured to entice him into conversation, but my efforts had not been attended by any success. This might perhaps have been due to a certain shrinking on my own part, for the man was awaiting his trial for murder, and the circumstances were particularly revolting.

He was a duly qualified medical practitioner whose name appeared on the register, and was, according to report, popular in the neighbourhood in which he resided. Yet he was charged with the deliberate and cold-blooded murder of his most intimate friend, and had achieved his end by the coward's resource—poison, administered, if suspicion proved correct, in the execution of his duty.

That a man whose mission was to heal, and in whom entire confidence was placed, should take advantage of his position, and, striking in the dark, destroy, appeared to me almost beyond credence. Yet the facts lay in a nutshell, and all London rang with them.

It was, therefore, not without doing violence to my feelings that I again sought the presence of the accused, and met the cold glance shot from beneath a pair of half-closed lids. He was a man of middle height, with a face from which the fresh colour had ebbed away, and keen, clear grey eyes—eyes that might have lent themselves willingly enough to the emphasising of some smart joke or epigram, but which now glittered strangely. As they rested upon me there lingered in their depths an expression of half-concealed disdain that caused my own to flash in involuntary self-defence.

"A parson, bound down by Thirty-nine Articles—a parson, set and sealed, but a man for all that," he said, smiling.

The smile, lighting up his face like sunshine, acted as a disguise; he looked another being. Or had he, perchance, thrown off a disfiguring mask to show himself in his true colours?

"Well," he continued, in a pleasant voice, "this is the fourth time you have come to inspect the caged animal. What is your opinion of me?"

Moved by a sudden impulse, I took the hand that lay so close to mine and grasped it. He returned the pressure warmly.

"You are no murderer," I said. "Of that I am certain."

The clasp of his fingers relaxed, and he allowed my hand to drop.

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"Thanks," he said simply.

The monosyllable had a true ring, but his voice faltered. He rose, paced his cell, then, halting at my side, touched my shoulder.

"No, I am no murderer," he continued slowly, "but, for all that, *I killed my friend;* the best of friends; the noblest of men. Bah! What a fool I am!"

He brushed his hand across his eyes with an impatient gesture, and resumed his seat.

"If I am not trespassing on your time," he said courteously, "I should like to tell you how it happened."

"No, no," I interrupted hurriedly; "consider."

He laughed mockingly.

"You would bid me reserve my defence. Friend, I have none to make. Man is not my judge. Before my God I stand or fall. Listen."

I clasped my hands together, and, bending forward, fixed my eyes upon his face, losing neither glance nor word.

"The deceased and I were close friends," said he, "and had been so from boyhood, for we went to school together. What a bright little chap he was, to be sure. We boys used to call him 'Quicksilver'; and there never was such a fellow to run or leap, never. But what of that?"

He broke off suddenly, as if to recall his wandering spirit to the matter in hand, and continued with forced calmness.

"He was two years younger than I, and we were not at all of the same nature. He was of an intensely sensitive temperament in spite of all his cheerfulness—something of a poet folks said, though I don't know much of poets myself, so that I am but a poor judge. *I* chose to be a doctor, because I thought then, as I think now, that there is no finer profession on God's earth. *Dick* chose to be a doctor because he liked to be what I was. No better reason, upon my life! You see he was uncommonly fond of me."

Another pause, broken only by the buzzing of some flies and the quick sharp drawing of the speaker's breath. His face was flushed, his eyes soft and humid.

"Well, we were together as students, he and I. Where *I* went *he* went; *my* favourite study was his favourite study; *my* work his work, though in the dissecting room *he* would turn sick and faint, while *I*, for the love of science, conquered distaste. We are none of us born alike. Have you realised that, reverend sir?"

I nodded my head by way of answer to the sharp, cutting interrogation, and made a sign that he should continue.

"In spite of physical drawbacks, Dick got through his exams., and we two settled down as partners."

"I was not aware that the deceased was a medical man," I interrupted.

"Probably not. He did not long continue in the profession. That is the point I was just about to reach. It happened in this way. After we had been working together for about a year he was called upon to attend a serious case. A poor fellow in the next street was attacked by cancer. It was in his face. I will give you some of the details."

He did so in a dry, even professional manner, sparing no particular. Sickened by the account I laid my hand on his sleeve and bade him desist.

"No," he answered quietly, "it is necessary that you should hear this. It affects the *dénoûment*."

Yet his face was paler ere he had completed his narrative.

"Horrible!" I gasped. "Most horrible!"

"So my friend considered. He came home late one night, and as we two sat smoking together he looked into my eyes and said, 'Jack, I'm not fit to be a doctor.'

"'No, dear boy,' said I; 'I think not.' For he was as white as a sheet, and trembled like a woman. I talked to him a bit, and tried to make him look at things in a matter-of-fact way, but he could not.

"'I have known for so long that I am the wrong man in the wrong place,' said he; 'but this is the climax. You will have to get another partner, Jack.'

"He lit his candle thoughtfully, then blew it out again in an absent fashion.

"'Old man,' said he, 'I want you to make me a promise.'

"'Supposing,' he observed, in an odd, mechanical way, 'that this most frightful of all frightful diseases were to visit me, you must give me your word that you will put me out of my misery. You must promise that you will not stand by and see me die as that man is dying now.'

"The picture of the scene we two had witnessed a few hours since rose before me, and something of the horror that overcame him communicated itself to me.

"'Yes, I will promise,' I replied unhesitatingly; 'and you will do me the same good turn if——'

"'Hush!' he cried, lifting his troubled face. 'Swear!'

"So we swore; he still pale to the lips, I half-mocking, half-solemn. But I did not know. God help me, I did not know!"

The prisoner's head dropped upon his breast; the feverish light died out of his eyes; his lips worked convulsively. Gazing at him, I feared he would not find strength to finish his narrative, but suddenly, and by a strong effort, he gathered himself together, and went on speaking:

"That was five years ago; five years all told. Throughout that period our friendship deepened, and the ties that bound us together grew closer and closer. At last one day my friend sent for me. He had been looking out of sorts for some time past, and I had felt a little anxious about him, though, when we met, he had always appeared to be in excellent spirits. On this occasion, however, he made no attempt at cheerfulness, but told me his fears. Alas! they were only too true; the disease he had so dreaded was already far advanced. At first he hoped against hope, and I abetted him in his self-delusion, but the day came when even to *his* buoyant nature hope was no longer possible. It was when he lay in utter helplessness and direst agony that he reminded me of my promise.

"'When I exacted it from you,' he said, 'it was because I knew that this was a family complaint with us. And I can't stand it, that is all.'

"It was not all. Day by day he grew rapidly worse, and I was his sole medical attendant; day by day, racked by such pangs as you can scarcely conceive, he turned his piteous eyes on me, and bade me be true to my vow. I turned a deaf ear to his intreaties; I refused to listen. The words of the old commandment, '*Thou shalt do no murder*,' stayed the hand of mercy—until one awful night when I sat beside him and could no longer bear to watch his torments. Then strength gave way, or came to me, I know not which, and—you know the rest."

I looked into his ashen face, my own pale as death.

"Now for your sermon, sir," he said abruptly. But I could not speak.

"Silent!" cried the prisoner; "and small blame to you. It is a hard enough riddle, but as for me I have no misgivings. The world and the world's opinion, your sapient judge and jury, what are they to me? I hear no voice save my friend's, with its feeble cry, '*God bless you, Jack.*' I see no face save my friend's, no longer distorted by pain, but calm and peaceful, as that of a little child. For the rest what have I to fear? God alone shall be my judge."

The prisoner spoke truly. It was not given to him to stand arraigned before any human tribunal—that very night his troubled spirit passed away. They found him in the early morning lying dead, his hands crossed, and the faint rose hue of dawn colouring his marble face.

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"YOU must know that at that time I was not as well off as I am now. Eliza and I were obliged to live in apartments.

"A Mrs. Marvin and her daughter occupied the first floor; I was to occupy the next floor, and a Mr. William Graham the back room on the top floor.

"It did not need a very sharp pair of eyes to discover that Mr. Will Graham was in love with Miss Emily Marvin. Eliza and I both understood it before many days.

"One day when I came home a little earlier than usual, Eliza said to me, 'Ted, I think there is something very mysterious about Miss Emily. I was going past their room to-day, and I happened to look in, and there sat Miss Emily at her writing desk. The tears were streaming down her cheeks, and her pen was going like wild-fire. She was talking to herself. When I got upstairs I lay down for a nap. Presently I heard a queer noise. First I couldn't think what it was, but it seemed to come from the gaspipe. I listened again, and then I made up my mind that somebody was playing on the bracket below as if it were a piano. I've always said her actions were very strange, and Mrs. Smith says so too. I tell you, Edward, that that beautiful young girl is crazy—stark, staring crazy!'

"As a matter of course I paid no further attention to what I felt certain was Eliza's nonsense about Miss Emily's mind being out of order. But one evening I went hurriedly up to my room. The moment I got into our room I heard a most peculiar noise. It sounded like 'Tick, tick, tick—tick, tick, tick,' and it came from the gaspipe.

"Now, I must tell you that among my earlier experiences in this life I was once a telegraph operator. I knew all the dots and dashes, just the horrid tick, and succession of ticks, and spaces between the ticks that are equivalent to the letters of the alphabet. And here I heard them again. I saw through the whole business at once, and as I did so I just lay down on the bed and laughed until I was afraid I'd have every button off my waistcoat.

"Someone had told me once that Will Graham was a telegraph operator. He had evidently taught Miss Emily the art, and here they were communicating with each other in the most satisfactory fashion, while everybody imagined that they were conducting themselves like perfect strangers. Then I waited patiently to hear what was being said. The conversation I had happened upon ran as follows:

"'How are you this evening?' 'Awfully tired. And you?' 'Tired too. Mamma has been particularly exasperating.' 'Has she? Am I never to have a talk with you again?' 'I don't know. Keep up your spirits.' 'I will, but it's dreadfully trying.' 'I think somebody's coming.' 'Oh, dear!'

"I heard a door open and shut, and I knew that somebody entered the room below.

"Well, matters were going along in this fashion when one day I began to think that the lovers were giving a new turn to their conversations. One day I heard Emily say to Will:

"'There's no use, I've got to do it.' 'What?' 'Kill her.' 'All right.' 'But I hate to; and I can't think how.' 'Shoot her.' 'Nonsense.'

"At this point Eliza came into the room, and she made such a noise that I couldn't hear anything more. But not long afterwards there were more serious communications:

"'Dear, dear Will?' 'What is it?' 'I won't love you if you won't help me.' 'I will help you—with all my might.' 'Then tell me what is a good way to kill an old woman.' 'Arsenic.' 'That won't do at all.' 'Blow her up with gunpowder.' 'Nonsense! You can't help me one bit.' 'I'll die for you.' 'I don't want you to die. I want her to die, and I don't know how to kill her.' 'Well, kill her somehow, or she'll be the death of both of us.'

"How could these two innocent-looking young people be depraved enough to plot the murder of a fellow-being in such a heartless manner? And who could the fellow-being be? Who but the poor old lady to whom Miss Emily owed her being?

"Well, at last matters came to a crisis. It was one summer's night. As I lay in bed I heard a noise.

"I listened intently. Whether it was a presentiment or not, I don't know, but I felt sure at once that something dreadful was coming. It did.

"'I've made up my mind, Will,' from below.

"'Well, to do what?'

"'Just as you said. Shooting's the best. She'll die instantly, you know, and I won't have any morbid farewells to go through. I don't feel up to such a thing—have never had any practice in just that line.'

"'Horrible!' I thought. 'People don't generally get any practice at murdering their mothers.'

"'I'm going to do it now, too. I've dallied over it a dreadful while, and I'm going to have it over by midnight. Then I'll breathe more freely. There'll be nothing left but the marriage, and after that I can rest.'

"'All right; go at it.' This from above. 'Do it up brown. I'll help you spend the money.'

"I could stand it no longer. 'Eliza!' I shrieked, 'there's murder going on in this house. Get up!'

"I simply flew up. In two seconds I had on a pair of trousers and a coat. Eliza tried to hold me, but I flung her off. I expected the sound of a pistol shot before I could get downstairs.

"I went down three steps at a time. On my way I met a party of people coming from the front room, where they had been playing whist.

"'Mr. Jones!' shrieked our landlady, seeing my excited face.

"'Madam,' I cried, 'there is murder going on in your house. Come at once—come! To the rescue, I command you!'

"With the whole house following, I rushed to the door of Miss Marvin's room. I flung my whole strength against the wood. A series of shrieks came from within.

"'It's locked! It's locked! It's locked!' I cried.

"By this time I had succeeded in convincing somebody that some foul deed was under way, for the servants came rushing up. One had the fire-tongs, the other had seized a decanter, which she evidently meant to use as a bludgeon.

"Bent on saving that poor old lady from a dreadful death at her daughter's hands, I threw my whole strength against that door. There was a straining of the wood, a bursting of the latch, the door gave way, and there we stood in the midst of the room. I gave one spring towards the murderess, and pinioned her in my arms.

"What happened next? Why, that miserable wretch, Will Graham, actually threatened to have me arrested for assaulting his promised wife. Think of it—when I knew I was stopping a terrible crime.

"The murder wasn't anything. Miss Emily was one of your precious literary people—writing a story with a murder in it. She and Will Graham had been engaged for three years. He usually helped her out with her plots. Just now there was a family row because Will wouldn't take the old lady's money to go into business with. Will said he would not risk impoverishing her. The old lady got provoked She was tired of seeing Will nothing but a telegraph clerk, so she said they shouldn't speak to each other until he came to his senses and went into something for himself."

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